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Extracting the wisdom

Lola Cohen's book keeps the work of Lee Strasberg in the mainstream

Lee Strasberg's an icon. The heralded father of Method Acting, that uniquely American, and film-savvy mixture of various European thespian techniques, has one of those names people love to drop in conversation, to reference in weighted discussions of modern art and culture.

The Lee Strasberg Notes, an elegant and well-illustrated new book of subtle wisdom and anecdotal history edited by Woodstocker Lola Cohen, a former student of the master and a masterful acting teacher herself, is similarly bound for redolence and impact. A former leading light of the legendary Woodstock Youth Theater of the 1990s, as well as a 2009 Artist in Residence at SUNY Ulster, she'll be hosting a book signing, reading, and appreciation of all things Strabergian at Joshua's Upstairs at 3 p.m. Sunday, April 25, courtesy of the good folks at Golden Notebook.

Strasberg almost single-handedly catapulted the idea of the acting teacher and coach into the commons. He pushed the craft involved in portraying others from an outward-thrusting demonstration to something lived-within, empathic. He took the "theatrical" world of Garrick, the Booths, Bernhardt and the Barrymores and pushed it into the much-more psychologically-aware and attuned world of habitation, whereby actors and actresses became who they portrayed.

Without Strasberg, we'd never have had the intensities of Brando, Clift, Nicholson, and De Niro; the depths of Streep, Lange, Spacek and so many others who pushed beyond mere stardom just as Marilyn had after encountering Lee's methodology...let alone his methods of inspired (and inspiring) relaxation.

Cohen pulled the material for the book from hours of videotape from Strasberg's classes during his later years at his own Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute, when he was said to have been at a peak of understanding of his craft of teaching, culled from a half century of practice and honing, of careful thought and analyses.

"In editing, compiling and organizing the material in the book, I was guided by three principles," Cohen writes in her own introduction to this work that also includes a forward by Martin Sheen and cover blurbs by Ellen Burstyn, Francis Ford Coppola and Johnny Depp. "To reflect the natural divisions still observed in the Institute's four-hour classes - two hours of students working on relaxation and sense memory exercises and then two hours of character and scenes - I have presented selections from the videotapes that treat, in order, the concerns routinely addressed in the classes. In addition, because I was confronted with repetition in hundreds of hours of tapes classes, I observed a second goal, to blend the versions of Lee's acting insights and instruction that represent the most accurate and accessible statements of his ideas...A third guiding principle concerns capturing his personality as a teacher, an element I believe is critical to the book's usability and effectiveness."

Cohen said that the work involved started with a simple wish to save the videotapes Strasberg made of his every utterance and action as a teacher during his final decade, then progressed through years of manual transcription, much of it in longhand, the caring touch of which warms the book. "My goal was to maintain the dramatic quality, clarity, emotion, assuredness, and, as much as possible, the formidable flavor of the Lee Strasberg voice."

Apparently, she has succeeded in the world Strasberg, and she, professionally

inhabit: word is that the book's become a record seller in Drama and Theater-oriented bookstores and is already being ordered by other teachers. More importantly, though, is the manner in which Cohen's sense of organization in this work, as well as that caring warmth of her editing, give all of Strasberg's lessons a reach far beyond the stage or film sets he was originally aiming at. Think of Chekhov, O'Neill, or Bergman's reach beyond their mediums into general lessons for all mankind.

"His world was art," Cohen added of her epic struggle to complete this book. "What I tried to do was just extract the wisdom,"

She tells, apart from the words of her mentor, how famous actors would come to Strasberg when their careers would wane. He'd tell them they'd lost their ability to relax, to appear relaxed.

"Here are a few of Lee's pearls of wisdom, not in any particular order," Cohen adds. "The character comes alive if you believe in what you're doing. Take your time and be specific. The thought comes before the line, not the line before the thought. Art is in the choice; the choice is that which conditions art. Art is longer than life. The imaginary realities you create must force the scene to happen. When left high and dry by a director, the actor must fill the directorial void themselves. Use the relaxation to eliminate fear and tension that interrupts expression. Words are a lifeline the actor desperately tries to hold on to. Don't, you must sink or swim."

Growing up, Cohen said, she inhabited a world where her parents and their friends all revered The Group Theater, The Actors Studio, Judy Garland, Clifford Odets, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, the great Rodgers and Hammerstein and other musicals...and Lee Strasberg.

"They saw everything on Broadway in a time when it didn't break the bank," she said of that time in New York when one could vocally admire the idealism of Karl Marx, and question the ruthlessness of capitalism. "Lee Strasberg was a household name and so it was natural for me to seek him out to study."

Now, she gives back, she says. And Cohen hopes to share all she's learned, from Strasberg as well as in her own years of teaching, and has worked to get this book's voice so perfect, beyond just those interested in acting.

"The character comes alive if you believe in what you are doing, are properly motivated and able to get into the skin of the character through each of the senses which the exercises teach you to do," she says, paraphrasing her own book. "To 'act' is to live the truth of each moment, revealing the inner psychological life of the character allowing the audience to connect with the experience in the service of the play or film."

Talk will surely be about life lessons...and for coming out to Joshua's Upstairs this Sunday, April 25 at 3:00 PM, to share in this new work's debut...++

For further information and copies of The Lee Strasberg Notes by Lola Cohen, available from Routledge, call the Golden Notebook at 679-8000.



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